

Emma and the Party

Ten minutes and I'm already bored. Ok, so I had been pretty much determined that this was going to be a terrible night before I ever set foot out the door, but that doesn't mean this party is any less dull.

The place is pretty nice: not to my taste but it must have cost a fair bit. Charles Howarth's idea of a little place in the country is an old Georgian manor house that's been restored, and improved on, to give a contemporary feeling of space to a building that drips nostalgia. Every piece of furniture could be antique, but shine like the day they were first made. The colour scheme features a lot of greens and browns, but they make the place feel rich and vibrant rather than musty.

Shame the people don't do the same. You'd think a room full of vampires would know how to have fun, but even the donors that are mingling and proffering any artery you care to sample are pleasantly blank and accommodating. Give me five minutes with one of them (we don't even have to be alone) and I'm pretty sure I could change that, but I doubt Charles would be too happy.

Actually, that's almost a good enough reason to do it.

I sigh. Charles probably wouldn't even bat an eyelid. He's completely insufferable and he's been trying to get into my good books for thirty years already. So far he doesn't seem to be able to fathom that I can't stand him.

His other guests seem to be associates rather than friends: the kind of people he's trying to impress not have a good time with. As they are vampires they are all beautiful, which at least helps the scenery. I don't mean to brag: it's a purely evolutionary thing. Vampires aren't lions to go chasing after the herds: we mesmerise our prey and it's much more entertaining way to hunt. On the other hand, these people also all seem to be incredibly wealthy, which is certainly not a prerequisite of being a vampire, and every one is well seasoned: there can't be a single vampire under two hundred in the place. What's rarer is some of them are even well known. We don't normally go for fame, but the leggy one over there in the nonexistent skirt is a model (underwear or wedding dresses or something), and that middle aged white guy is a politician I think...huh, that guy on the right looks like his mother still dresses him. No doubt he has some other redeeming quality.

There is one thing that absolutely everyone seems to have in common, humans and vampires alike, and that is that I've never met any of them before. I thought at least Leah would be here: she's Charles' friend. But, no. Great. This is going to be the funnest night ever.

Silly me. There is one person I know here and unfortunately he's has spotted me. Charles politely excuses himself from whatever inane chatter he was having with the bland people and heads my way. I force a smile to my face. I don't try to

hide that it is forced.

"Great party." My voice lacks enthusiasm.

Charles's smile flashes at me. It's bright and charming and everything you might want a smile to be. I'm unimpressed. "Glad you're having a good time."

"I didn't say that. Is Leah not coming?"

"She sent her apologies." He's good at choosing which parts to listen to. "I'm so glad you decided to come. It wouldn't be the same without you."

"You didn't exactly give me a choice."

"Oh yes. How did that go by the way?"

I snort softly (in the most ladylike way possible). He doesn't care how it went. Hell, I hardly care about some fuckup newbie. "Fine. The kid's still in town, but he's not going to make that mistake twice."

"Good." Oh the concern: way to take an interest. He looks over my shoulder and gestures at someone behind me. "Sorry I have to talk to someone. I'll see you later," I manage to avoid the kiss he tries to give me. "Enjoy the party."

He hurries off and my duty is done. All I said was that I would come to the party: I never said I would stay. I came, I saw, now I'm going.

Still, it seems a shame to pass up an easy meal. Sadly the donors are pretty popular and I'm not in the mood to hang around and wait for a turn. Instead I just grab the arm of the closest one I can find and let my teeth sink into a man's meaty wrist. He's pretty good: strong and thick, but I don't get much more than a taste before the vampire who had him first bats me away.

Yeah ok, it's rude to start noshing on someone else's meal, but it turns out I don't care.

Turns out the other vampire does though. By the time I'm on my feet again he has his meal sheltered protectively behind him. Poor donor looks a bit confused, but he's cute: blond, dash of stubble and a short sleeved white t-shirt that has the advantages of being tight enough to show off his body and giving easy access to neck, wrist and crook of the elbow (an underrated drinking spot). The vampire only looks a handful of years older than his prey and is wearing what looks like a brand new tux that does all the right things. He's going to kick himself when he get the cleaning bill for getting blood out of it. Messy eaters are such a turn off.

He's looking at me with his pupils still wide, his teeth exposed in the universal sign of "I'm warning you" and he looks about ready to pounce on me.

Guess this could be a fun party after all.

The skirt of my dress is annoying, but at least it's short enough and flowing enough that I can move freely. I'm just glad I wore pants today instead of a thong. I whip off my cardigan and throw it to one side to stop myself getting tangled up in it. I don't really want his donor, I can get my own within seconds of leaving, but I haven't had a good fight in a while and this guy is just too easy to provoke. People are starting to gather to see what happens and just the sound of Charles' voice asking us to behave is enough to get me going.

It's a short fight. My opponent may or may not be older than me, but he is

obviously far more boring. He's as fast and strong as any vampire I've met and he should be easily stronger than me since he's got about a foot of height and about four stone of weight on me, but he's so clumsy it hardly matters.

I know, I know, we both have nice dense vampire muscles that would put any human weight lifter to shame, but he still has more muscle to be dense and could easily swat me into the floor if he actually knew what he was doing. Instead all he manages to do is knock himself off balance and practically ask me to kick his ass.

See, there are lots of different ways people react to becoming a vampire. Some become feral, some become strong and some assume that since they have strength and immortality they might as well work on the really important things like money and influence. And hey, when you've had hundreds of years to play the game and make the connections you can get pretty damn rich and powerful in the human world. Of course, against another vampire, doing things the way we instinctively deal with things, you're a pansy.

I get him on the floor and I can't resist biting him. There's no need to: vampire blood is useless to us and actually tastes kind of musty (sort of like it's been left out for a few days), but it's a dominance thing. It's a little on the feral side of where I like to be, but sometimes you just have to go with your instincts.

Same goes for when someone drags you off your prey. Or in this case two someones. I can let it go when I'm thinking clearly, but I've fought and I've won and I'm feeding and I'm really not too happy about being interrupted.

And I keep my nails nice and sharp.

I slash out at neck height and hit each of the men who have grabbed me with clean thin slashes. It's barely noticeable for a vampire and a warning only: I'm not feral enough to jump on two guys who are obviously much bigger than me. I don't try to bite my erstwhile opponent again either: he's down, I'm proved my point and had my fun and now it's time to go. The heavies are both healed within seconds and keep a close eye on me as I walk over to pick up my cardy. Within a minute even the vampire on the floor is healed and he's not very happy.

His instincts must not work at all anymore. He tries to jump me from behind when I bend to pick up my cardigan. Sadly, the surprise part of his surprise attack is a bit lacking as he growls under his breath right before he pounces. I turn slightly and just help his momentum on a little with a tug of his arm. He sprawls into the two peacekeepers and I feel smug for all of two seconds before I realise this guy has completely lost it. He's lashing out at anyone and everyone and though at the moment his brain cells aren't speaking to each other, his friends appear to have decided he's suffered just the right amount of abuse about now and pile in to help him.

Well, you can picture where this is going. I know I can and so, better part of valour and all that, I take myself to the other side of the room to watch the escalating melee from a distance.

Now I know the people in this room like to think they are the model of civilised society, but I also know fun when I see it and these guys are having fun.

Nothing quite like a no-holes-barred scrap far away from prying eyes to really get your juices flowing.

And juices are flowing. Glad I'm not paying the dry cleaning bill.

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An out of control party on a rich country estate. Not exactly Evan's cup of tea, but it paid the bills. A scandal here, a click of a camera there and he had rent for next month.

It wasn't ideal, but Evan could handle sleaze in small doses. Why all the juicy stuff had to happen in the middle of the night was another matter. And how the hell did Deborah always manage to sound so awake when she called him?

Right now it was almost 4am and since the front and back gates were already coated with rival photographers, Evan was trudging through expensive landscaping to try and get a decent shot. Everyone was hoping for a glimpse of someone famous being escorted out by the police, but it looked like Evan was a little late. There hardly seemed to be anyone home, let alone a crazy celebrity party. The few lit rooms he did pass showed him nothing more interesting than a housekeeper or two cleaning up and snaps of a few dirty dishes weren't exactly going to get him paid.

All this way, in the middle of the night and the best shot he had was girls in maid outfits.

He sighed and kept walking. Finally even the police were left empty-handed, the sirens mute as they crawled down the driveway, trying not to flatten the photographers.

Enough. Time to get out of here.

That was easier said than done. With the headlights from the police cars gone and the lights in the house slowly being extinguished, suddenly it wasn't too easy to see where he was going. Plants conspired to trip him and almost succeeded several times as shadows cleverly concealed every obstacle. He had just made it to the path that followed the wall along edge of the property and was looking forward to an easy walk to the main gate, when he realised two figures were coming towards him through the darkness.

One of them was angry, that was clear enough from the arm-waving and general tension, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. Even as they got closer he couldn't hear a thing, and he would have found it quite interesting if he hadn't been involved in making sure no one saw him here. He ducked behind a hedge and tried not to make a sound as a twig stabbed him in the ankle. After a moment of frantic mental swearing Evan peered over the top of his hiding place.

A man and a woman. The man looked like he could get violent at any minute, though even this close the most Evan could make out was a faint hum of their voices on the edge of his hearing. The woman just looked amused, even pleased,

though by the looks of the rips in her dress she shouldn't have had too much to be pleased about. Evan eased his camera up to the top of the hedge slowly so as not to attract attention and clicked off a few shots. It was so dark they probably wouldn't come out, but there was something going on here he wanted to capture. The woman listened to the man's ranting for a moment longer then turned and walked resolutely towards the wall with a small smile despite the way the man seemed to be yelling at her back.

Evan rubbed his ears. Why couldn't he hear them? They couldn't be more than a few feet away and the man certainly looked like he was shouting. Leaves and twigs snapped under her feet as the woman walked towards him so it wasn't a problem with his hearing. Would be a problem if she found him though.

He ducked completely behind the hedge and slipped his camera underneath it: hopefully out of sight in case of awkward questions. He thought he'd got away with it when she walked right passed him to stand facing the wall. Then she turned and smirked at him.

And then she jumped over the wall.

The 7 foot high wall. Just jumped over it. Like she did it every day. That was different.

Luckily the man who was arguing with her either didn't notice the smirk or didn't care. He headed back towards the house and Evan breathed a soft sigh of relief that set him off into a brief fit of coughing. Stupid cold air. Good job that hadn't happened a few minutes earlier.

Once he could breathe again it occurred to him that the man (though pissed off) was not surprised that the woman had just leapt over a 7 foot wall. This seemed to suggest one of two things: either Evan had imagined it or for these two this was normal.

Evan didn't think he could make up his mind either way about that just yet. He'd never hallucinated before that he knew of, but there was a first time for everything. The other option...it was just too cool to be true. And would warrant more investigation.

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The next day I go see Leah.

I guess you could call Leah Triselle my best friend, but oldest friend would be more accurate. Leah lives in an old house in an area that used to be a peaceful village, but which now has become just another suburb. She has the kind of house I remember being a fad a hundred or so years ago with lots of big bay windows that aren't exactly vampire friendly during the day, but the place is pretty big: three floors plus attic and basement, and enough land around it to mean nosy neighbours are never a problem. There's a lilac arbour over the path to the front door: a flower that's best in the evening. Despite the sun beating on my back, the memory of their fragrance makes me smile at the gentility of this place.

The door is answered by a young oriental girl who bobs a curtsy and shows me through to the drawing room without a word. She gestures to Leah, bobs again and scurries away.

Leah is so fixated on her current piece she doesn't even realise I'm there. By the looks of her colour coated fingers and the dusting of blue on the side of her nose, she's working in pastels today. At least her dress has managed to survive the morning's art, the layers of cream lace unmarred by chalk dust. Her bonnet, cream to match her dress, has not been so fortunate. A dark smudge shows on the ribbon that is tied in a neat bow under her chin to secure it. She's a very small person and the cut of her dress, complete with frills and lace, makes her look more like a doll than a grown woman. Even the frown creasing her forehead looks cute, but it's the middle of the day and I'm boiling alive.

"Leah. Leah!"

"Hm?" She quirks an eyebrow in my direction, but it takes a moment for her eyes to follow. "Emma? What are you doing here during the day?"

"Coming to see you. The last two times I tried to come at a decent time of night you were asleep."

Leah shakes her head, sending ripples down her long blond hair, almost as pale as the cream of her dress and bonnet.

"The light's all wrong at night so I've been working during the day."

"That's great: can we go somewhere else now?"

"Hm? If you like."

She hops off the stool she had been sitting on and comes to join me in the hall. She takes the lead and we head towards the kitchen and the cool stairs that lead towards the cellar.

"How can you stand working during the day?" I ask, flapping my t-shirt by the collar to try and get a breeze. The top is too fitted to help much, but I've got to do something.

Leah shrugs one delicate little shoulder. "I need to. When I draw at night everything ends up so shadowed. I'm trying something new. How was the party?"

"Entertaining."

"Did everyone survive?"

She knows me too well. It makes me smile.

The cellar is as much an artist's studio as it is a living space. On the far side, partially screened by a jut of wall is Leah's bedroom, but the rest of the space is given over to Leah's latest projects. From the variety of different media and subjects I'm guessing she hasn't completely made up her mind what she's working on yet.

"You weren't at the party last night. I haven't seen you in so long I thought I better check you were still around." I wave a hand at the scattered sketches around the room. "Looks like you've been pretty busy."

Leah frowns prettily. "And getting nowhere. I've been trying to capture light:

brilliant, shining light, but I've not had much success so far."

"It's not really something vampires are cut out for."

"That's why I've been trying to do it."

And that is one of the many reasons why Leah and I get on so well: our obtuse nature. It certainly wouldn't be a mutual interest in art. Don't get me wrong: I can appreciate a nice painting or whatever, I even got Leah to teach me the basics of composition and technique at one point, but it's not something I've ever really cared about.

Leah on the other hand has had almost 300 years to practice and it shows in her work. She's had shows all over the world of every style and subject and there are only a handful of artists in the world who can even come close to the magic she creates. Still, ask the man in the street about famous artists and not one will say they've heard of Leah Triselle. But then who cares what the man in the street thinks: the people who need to know about Leah and her work and will get discreet personal invitations to her latest showings and pay vast amounts of money to own anything she's ever doodled on.

"You look hot."

She's not commenting on my body. Vampires and sun don't go well together. We don't sweat and all that UV radiation can cause cancer you know. Seriously: I've already got a new mole on my neck I wouldn't mind getting rid of. Luckily these things are easily fixed.

"I could use a drink."

She stands and pulls a cord in the corner. I can hear a bell ring upstairs at the back of the house, and it's only a moment before the door to the cellar opens revealing the girl who showed me in.

"Yuuko, our guest is thirsty."

Yuuko bobs her head briefly, but doesn't leave the bottom of the stairs. She looks up and meets Leah's eyes and there's something between desire and pain in them.

Leah smiles indulgently and beckons her forward. "Oh darling. Come here."

Yuuko does as she's told and stops less than an inch from Leah and now there's only desire in her eyes. I mentioned Leah was a tiny person. Even with this little Japanese girl she actually has to stretch a tiny bit to sink her teeth into the girl's neck. Yuuko shudders and Leah looks up at me with eyes so dilated her irises have disappeared. She pulls away from Yuuko after only a moment and fixes the girl with those eyes, her eye teeth now clearly pointed and still pink with blood.

"There, now be a good girl and say hello to Emma."

She gently turns the dreamy girl, but she doesn't have to walk far. I'm already standing, my teeth extended, my eyes as wide as Leah's so that even this dim cellar takes on an almost painful brightness. The girl's neck is already starting to heal and I lick up the overflow before I sink my teeth into the holes Leah has left.

The girl's blood tastes clear and almost sweet. Her body is slight and fragile in

my arms and I hold her close to enjoy the feeling. I'm not exactly the biggest girl around and normally that's fine by me, but every now and then it feels good to have a small body under my power.

I feel my body shed the effects of the sunlight in less than a minute, but drink for just a few moments longer. The girl practically swoons in my arms when I pull away, but Leah is there to take her and cradle her on her lap.

"She's a sweet little thing."

"Isn't she?" Leah replies as she fixes Yuuko's heavy lidded eyes with her own and smiles indulgently. She turns to me and allows Yuuko to snuggle up to her. "Are you still with those strange Blood Drinkers Anonymous people?"

"Nah. There was a thing. It wasn't fun anymore, just a lot of whiney newbies." I sigh and slump back down into my seat. "Though now I'm bored."

Leah turns back to Yuuko and strokes her hair while the girl stares at me. "You get bored far too easily."

"True, but knowing that doesn't stop me being bored."

"I'm sure something will come up eventually."

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Evan changed the contrast again and frowned at the pitiful results. He could make out the woman and man he had seen the night before, but there was no way anyone reputable was going to want to buy these even if it turned out they did show something interesting. The quality just wasn't good enough.

A quick Net search (on his brand new computer thanks to whoever had fried his last one) had given him the identity of the man: Charles Howarth himself, host of the alleged party and apparently a heavy investor in a lot of lucrative companies. The woman was a bit more of a mystery. Strangely enough rich folks don't tend to post a list of those invited to their parties complete with photos and a Google search of "short, brown-haired girl" wasn't giving him much to go on. She wasn't anyone he even remotely recognised, but he passed a cropped photo of her to a few contacts in the celebrity snapping industry anyway and had it confirmed: she wasn't famous or newsworthy in any way.

Not newsworthy maybe but definitely interesting. Evan had gone over and over what had happened the night before (the weird silent argument, the jump, the way they managed not to fall over in the dark (not that he was bitter or anything)) and the more he thought about it the stranger other things seemed. Like how the party seemed to empty out faster than the police could get there. Like how there were so many maids already working on clearing up so quickly. Evan wished he had paid more attention now to what they had been cleaning up.

Then he remembered: he'd taken a whole load of pictures.

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"Em?"

"Which one are you?"

"It's Scot."

"Hey Scot. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I'm in Leah's bed. I thought I might as well stay until the sun went down and then it seemed rude to leave so suddenly and when there was such good company. Leah's out for the count after being in the sun all day and Yuuko is sleeping contentedly between us. The girl blarily opens her eyes at the sound of my voice, but I stroke her hair and keep my voice low until she's asleep again. "Someone has been asking around about who you are. He sent a photo to some people. Malcolm passed it on to us."

I stretch luxuriously. "Who's Malcolm?"

"One of us. He's seen you around and thought you might want a heads up, but since he doesn't know you..."

"He called you guys. Isn't he considerate." I kick back the covers a little. Yuuko is sweet, but her body makes the bed too warm. "Do me a favour and find out who this guy is? Don't play too rough with him though: he might be entertaining."

"Sure, but you'll owe us."

"Again?"

Sam pipes up in the background. "Get us the new Cereal Killer game and we'll call it even."

I laugh. They really are still teenagers at heart. "Deal. I'll even get the collectors edition. Call me when you've found something."

We say our goodbyes and I close my phone. It's early and while I've sipped from Yuuko already this evening a meal would be good.

Still, it's comfy here, and while the party last night was a lot of fun, I'm tired. Curl back up round Yuuko and let my eyes slip shut.

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It took another couple of hours of scouring through everything he'd taken, but he finally found something interesting...

Was that blood they were scrubbing off the carpet?

His computer blipped at him. He hit a button and the picture he had been sending round appeared with just one small caption: "Who wants to know?" Albireo: this guy was hardcore. Evan had no idea how he had got the picture, but if he knew who that woman was he would risk it.

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I don't know how long I've been asleep, but I wish I'd turned my phone off.

"Please leave your message at the beep. Beep."

"We have everything you want to know on the guy."

"What guy?"

"The guy who was asking after you."

"Oh that guy. Why do I care again?"

"Because it's breathreturning. You know, the same guy who tried to hack your computer?"

I sit up and grab my clothes from the floor and move out into the living area to change so I don't wake them.

"Tell me."

"He's a nobody." Whichever brother is on the other end of the line sounds disappointed. "A freelance photographer. Does some artsy stuff that's pretty decent, but what little money he has comes from sleazy tabloid shots and advertising publicity stuff. No criminal record: that he even tried to hack your system is ridiculous considering he doesn't seem to know shit about it. He must have had help, but his friends are even more nobodies than he is. He's got almost as many odd interests as you, but that's about the only thing interesting about him. Looks like the only reason he was asking around about you is that you came out of Charles Howarth's place at the wrong moment and he snagged a photo he was hoping to sell."

I remember the man in the bushes. So that's all this was: he saw me jump the wall and now he's curious. Not bad. Most people wouldn't bother. A curious one could be fun. Curious enough to try and hack my computer, curious enough to believe his own eyes. I like him already.

"Have you got an address?"

"Address, date of birth, family history..."

I snatch a piece of paper out of one of the many sketchbooks lying around. "How about I take the address now and you email me the rest?"

"Trust us Emma this guy is dull with a capital D. Once we realised he was no one we even messaged him to see what he would say. He told us all about where he got the photo: just like that. He even gave us his real name. I'm telling you this guy doesn't even have an instinct for self-preservation."

"Just give me his address. And his real name while you're at it."

---- x ----

"Evan."

I'm smiling. I can't imagine why he looks so nervous. Maybe I can.

"Uh...hi."

He holds the door open so I can enter. How sweet. And the twins were right: no instinct for self-preservation.

I saunter into his living room. The flat is pretty small: the front door opens onto a short hallway with a bathroom through a door on the left. To the right of the living room is a kitchen, though it's hardly big enough to deserve the name since

it's smaller than the cupboard I use for a bedroom. To the left of the living room is the one and only bedroom if the dirty washing visible through the slightly open door is any indicator. The living room is small enough to feel cramped, but I approve of the row of tall bookshelves which line one wall. Glancing at the titles I can see that Evan's odd interests don't start and finish online. There is the ubiquitous television for two threadbare chairs to point towards, but it is the photographs that catch my attention. They are scattered over the coffee table and there are piles on the floor and balanced precariously on the nice new PC that sits in the corner. I pick up the nearest pile and shuffle through them. They're good: clean and crisp with minimal shadows and yet there's something haunting about them. In this pile there isn't a single picture of a person and I wonder what a human would look like if given this kind of photographic treatment.

"I guess Albireo told you I was asking after you?"

"Yes." The computer is a boring prepackaged model "perfect for home use" so the adverts would have us believe.

"You were at Charles Howarth's party."

It isn't a question but I answer anyway. "Yes."

The kitchen is surprisingly clean, though some of the dishes that are piled on the side look like they've been there for some time.

"How do you know Mr Howarth?"

"He's infatuated with me." I'm not conceited if it's true.

I head over to the bedroom door, but Evan leaps in front of me, closing it tightly before he turns to face me.

"Why are you here?"

I'll get around to that. Right now I'm more interested in the man in front of me. He's on the short side for a modern man, but still much taller than me and thin without the muscle to suggest he works out. He's lightly tanned, but then it's summer and he's a photographer: he must work outside every now and then. His dark hair might once have been short, but it's just shaggy now in a scrappy way that suggests that this is not a man who can afford extra hair cuts. He has a short beard that neatly covers his chin and mustache area without being one of those silly goatees. It's obviously trimmed fairly frequently and while his long sleeved navy t-shirt is obviously old and rather plain his clothes are clean and well cared for. This man isn't a slob trying to get away with living like a student the rest of his life, this is a man who has decided how he wants to live his life and has had to accept that it does not come with financial security.

"Don't want me to see your porn collection?" I ask with a smile, ignoring his question.

"My sex doll likes her privacy."

That makes me laugh.

"Why are you here?"

"You're not apologising for sneaking onto Charles property and taking my picture."

"Why would I? Why are you here?"

"I was curious. You try to access my computer and then start asking after me...it makes me wonder who you are too."

His eyes widen and I stand back a couple of steps as he coughs. He speaks with his fist still hovering in front of his mouth.

"You're malkavsdaughter?"

His voice is thick and he's gone very still. I fetch him a glass of water from his own kitchen and talk to him over my shoulder. "I normally go by Emma."

"You fried my computer!"

I pass him the glass and he sips from it slowly.

"You tried to hack my computer. And besides it was Albireo not me."

He clears his throat and his voice is stronger when he speaks. "What are you talking about? Even if I had a reason to hack into your computer I wouldn't know where to start!"

I consider him, the make of his computer, how he lives: he might just be telling the truth.

"That makes things a little more interesting. Guess you just got the short straw when whoever it was tried to cover their tracks. Or they wanted to frame you in particular."

"Why?" He looks confused rather than worried that someone might be trying to frame him.

"Who can say?"

He doesn't look at me as he brushes past me to stop in the middle of the living room. He may need room to think, but I prefer being up close. "How did you jump that wall?"

No hedging, no "did you really do that?" or "reassure me that I didn't see what I thought I saw" just straight to the heart of the matter.

"Guess."

He shakes his head as well he might. "I have no idea."

"But I bet we'll have a lot of fun as you try to find out."

I turn to go.

"That's it?"

I turn back and the look of confusion, fear and excitement on his face is wonderful. "You don't like a challenge?" I know he does. "Tell me how I did it and I'll give you a cookie."

He laughs and I watch him rise to it.

"Deal. But you've got to give me something. You're full name."

"Emma Andrews."

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Emma Andrews: what the hell could he get out of that?

Evan had been hoping for something exotic or at least a little unusual. There

must be thousands of Emma Andrews in the country! Ah well, it was a start. He knew some of her friends now as well: trying to look into Albireo's relationship to her wouldn't give him much (Albireo was too careful for that), but Charles Howarth would be bound to give him an opening.

There was no question that he wouldn't accept the challenge. Whoever this woman was she understood that much about him.

She was something though. Seeing her in the light was nothing like seeing her in the shadows outside Howarth's place. She was beautiful, with pale blue eyes and flawless skin, slim enough, but not drastically so. A bit on the short side, but then he could hardly talk. She'd bundled her hair up, but when it was down it looked like it would be past her shoulders and though her hair was a dark enough brown to be almost black her skin was surprisingly pale. Not Goth-pale, but this woman obviously wasn't fashionably tanned either.

It was late, early morning-type late, but Evan kicked his computer to life anyway and planned out in his head where he would start searching while it booted up. It hadn't even got to the welcome screen when he heard a commotion outside, the bins being knocked over. He would have put it down to a cat or even a fox if a deep masculine voice hadn't also shouted "Emma you bitch! Make a fool out of me!"

Evan was down the stairs and into the little courtyard that doubled as a car park for the residents before he had had a chance to think.

Seemed Emma had it well in hand though. Whoever this guy was he was getting his ass handed to him by a girl who couldn't be more than a couple of inches over five feet. Evan knew exactly how good he was at fighting and decided to stay the hell out of the way. From the corner of his eye he saw Mrs Angelo's curtain twitch and wondered how long it would take the police to get here.

A kick to the shin and a throw over her shoulders and the guy was on the floor. Evan could see Emma's mouth move, but all he could hear was the same low hum he had heard at Howarth's house. He made a mental note that that was another thing to look into.

Whatever Emma said the guy didn't seem impressed. He launched himself at her, but she simply stepped to one side. He tried it a couple more times and got the same result, but while Emma looked amused, whoever this man was certainly didn't. He was so mad he yelled as he barreled towards her once again, though this time she didn't step aside, but stepped towards him. There was a quick movement of arms and legs, a brief grapple and suddenly the man was pinned face down to the floor and Emma was biting him.

Sure she could have been whispering in his ear...and if Evan had been looking from a different angle he might have believed that, but the streetlights provided more than enough light to see her mouth on his neck...

There must have been a patrol car practically round the corner for them to come so fast. The police car's headlights swept around the corner and before it could even come to a complete stop Emma and her opponent had disappeared.

Leaving Evan as the only person in the car park.

"We got a call about a fight?" A tired policeman said as he got out of the car. His partner didn't even turn off the engine.

Evan shrugged. "I haven't seen anything."

"Do you mind if I ask what you're doing here?"

"I'm just getting in. I live there," he pointed to his flat.

"And you didn't see a fight? Maybe people running away?"

Evan shook his head. "Nope."

The policeman sighed. "Well thanks for your help."

Evan watched the police drive off before he headed towards the small alcove that was supposed to be for the bins, but actually held a washing line. He thought of the bite and the maids washing blood out of a manor house carpet. It was hard to make Emma out in the shadows, but he'd seen her run in there. He kept his voice low, wary of the curtain twitchers.

"You're a vampire. And I want my cookie."